

Human Organization, Vol. 61, No. 1, 2002

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0018-7259/02/010094-14\$1.90/1

## 1999 Peter K. New Prize Recipient

# *"It's In the Air": Redefining the Environment as a New Metaphor for Old Social Justice Struggles*

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Recently, minority activists have formed a new grassroots movement, known as environmental justice, to address toxic waste in their neighborhoods. By comparing and contrasting two environmental justice groups, this paper explores how adapting environmental discourse to traditional struggles for social justice affected grassroots minority activism. As they came to view their air, water, and soil as another aspect of life subject to institutional discrimination, the activists described in this paper constructed ambiguous environmental narratives that served as contexts for multiple organizing strategies. These strategies were not limited to ecological concerns, but included the social justice issues that each group had historically prioritized. In addition, the ambiguity of the environmental narratives activists created facilitated alliances with new organizational partners. Although the specific needs, goals, and outcomes of each case differed, both examples illustrate how "the environment" served as a flexible but powerful organizing narrative. Thus, including the environment on their agendas for social change enabled minority activists to develop and sustain new strategies and alliances that strengthened their struggles.

**Key words:** environment, urban social movements, minority activism, social justice, United States

Mentioning the term "environment" to adults in the Hyde Park neighborhood of Augusta, Georgia, prompted them to tell of the dust that covered their walls and reappeared as fast as they could wipe it off. They talked about the toxic release sirens coming from Thermal Ceramics, a nearby factory, that sometimes blared for eight hours, forcing them to leave their homes and spend time at the mall or the movies to escape the noise. They told of how they had permanent tickles in their throats and how their children were never far from their asthma inhalers. They talked of how their children could not dig in the dirt around their houses or play in the ditches that lined the streets of their neighborhood. For the residents of Hyde Park, and for the activists of the Hyde and Aragon Park Improvement Committee (HAPIC),<sup>1</sup> the environment is not something to be protected from human intervention and conserved for the preservation of wildlife. For them, because they are poor and

black, their environment is poisonous and they need to be protected from it.

Hyde Park's environmental conditions are far from unique in the United States. In the Northeast, for example, a heavily trafficked bridge and a local expressway intersect the Williamsburg-Greenpoint<sup>2</sup> neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York, and weave in and around a number of defunct manufacturing plants and factories in the area. Williamsburg-Greenpoint is also one of New York City's most ethnically diverse neighborhoods, housing Latinos (including Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and Mexicans), Polish, Irish, Italian, Asian, and African Americans, as well as a large number of Hasidic Jews. Several years ago, in a church-turned-community center on the south side of Williamsburg-Greenpoint, I joined approximately 15 neighborhood residents for a meeting of the Community Alliance for the Environment, or CAFE. One of CAFE's founders, Luis Garden Acosta, cheerfully welcomed his fellow activists and commended their hard work to improve the environment in their neighborhood – according to Acosta, "one of the most toxic in the city" (see Checker 2001).

Comparing and contrasting two cases, this paper illustrates how minority activists are appropriating mainstream environmental discourses and applying them to social justice issues to construct a new social movement, known as environmental justice. I argue that "the environment" served as a flexible narrative, which activists applied strategically. By presenting two comparative cases, I am able to build a

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Melissa A. Checker is completing her doctorate in anthropology at New York University. A portion of this research was supported by a Doctoral Dissertation Improvement Grant from the National Science Foundation. A previous version of this paper won the Society for Applied Anthropology's 1999 Peter K. New Student Paper Prize. I thank the activists of Hyde Park and Williamsburg-Greenpoint for sharing their experiences with me and allowing me to participate in their organizing activities. I also wish to thank Donald Stull, Uriel Grezemkovsky, Owen Lynch, and anonymous reviewers for Human Organization, whose comments helped this paper immeasurably.

broader framework for analyzing the social construction of grassroots environmental justice movements and, more generally, of multiracial and ethnic movements. In both cases, activists were not concerned about the environment until the early 1990s, when they realized it was poisoning them. Each set of activists began organizing for the environment only during the past decade. I therefore analyze their changing understandings of the environment by recounting their recent memories of becoming environmentally aware and then exploring how they continually adapted environmental discourse to meet their needs. As they came to view their air, water, and soil as another aspect of life subject to institutional discrimination, these activists constructed ambiguous environmental narratives that served as contexts for multiple organizing strategies. These strategies were not limited to ecological concerns, but included an array of social justice issues. Thus, the environment that activists described transformed into a kind of social, rather than ecological, environment.

Activists' specific political needs and racial and ethnic demographics also dictated their particular approaches to environmental organizing. HAPIC, which was for the most part a homogenous organization, needed to join with outside (mainly white, middle-class) groups. In this case, environmental narratives shifted contextually, alternately defining the environment as racist and as affecting all races alike. CAFE, on the other hand, was a multiethnic alliance and needed to find ways to sustain cooperation among ethnic groups within the organization. By framing the environment as a political issue that crossed ethnic boundaries, CAFE activists created and maintained a cooperative environmental coalition. Despite entering into environmental organizing from distinctly racial or ethnic perspectives, in both cases environmental organizing facilitated partnerships that crossed race, class, and social lines. Including the environment on their agendas for social change and constructing an expansive environmental narrative enabled activists to find new ways to seek, and sometimes achieve, long-standing political goals.

### **Bridging Troubled Waters: Minority Activism and Environmental Issues**

Environmental justice activists estimate that three out of five African Americans and Hispanic Americans live in communities with uncontrolled toxic waste sites. They also argue that 40 percent of hazardous waste landfills in the United States are in predominantly black or Hispanic communities, both low and middle income (Lee 1993:48). While certain scholars have disputed the statistics cited here (see, for example, Anderton et al. 1994), minority activists widely accept them as an accurate representation of the environmental hazards facing their communities. For example, in Hyde Park some residents estimated that one in three houses held someone with an environmentally related illness (fieldnotes, June 17, 1999:10). In Williamsburg-Greenpoint, activists

claimed that the pollution rate in their neighborhood was 60 percent above the national average. Such statistics, however, were difficult to confirm. In Hyde Park, various governmental and quasi-governmental agencies had conducted numerous tests, all with inconclusive results. In Williamsburg-Greenpoint, environmental-assessment data were almost 20 years out of date. Debating the scientific validity of the statistical information cited by environmental justice activists is not central to the arguments of this paper, however. I am concerned with developing an understanding of activists' perceptions of environmental degradation and how those perceptions shaped the development of their environmental activism.

Robert Gottlieb writes, "The ways in which ethnicity enters into the environmental experience...is influenced by a long-standing assumption by minorities that the environmental movement 'belongs' to upper-middle class or elite Anglo constituencies" (Gottlieb 1993:240). Indeed, until the late 1980s, most minority activists did not prioritize environmentalism on their agendas for social change (Bullard and Wright 1987). This reluctance stems partly from traditional views of the environmental movement that characterize it as mainly concerned with ecology, and partly from the fact that many mainstream environmental movements (such as the Sierra Club, the Nature Conservancy, and the World Wildlife Fund) historically excluded people of color from their staffs and agendas (see Bullard 1990; Gottlieb 1993; Lichterman 1995; Scheffer 1991; and Taylor 1989, 1992).

In the 1970s and 1980s, as environmental concerns in the United States shifted to toxic waste and its related health risks, environmental activists broadened their ideals and goals to cover a wide range of issues, from preserving natural resources to improving clean air and water regulations and opposing nuclear waste (Bryner 2001; Moberg 2001; Szasz 1994). Increased middle-class opposition to toxic industries, however, often called for reforms that would close industrial plants, leading to job loss and economic downturns in minority communities. Large corporations seized on these divisions and, in lobbying for new industry, pitted the promise of job creation against environmental concerns. This kind of "job blackmail" further explains why minority organizations were generally late in challenging environmental imbalances (Bullard 1990). Thus, the environmental movement seemed either to be irrelevant to, or at odds with, traditional social justice concerns, which focus on poor people and people of color and address issues such as unemployment, education, housing, and institutional discrimination (Darnovsky 1992; Taylor 1992:35; see also Ross 1993).

However, in 1982, an incident in Warren County, North Carolina, began to raise environmental alarms for some minority activists. In response to being selected for a polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB) landfill, a rural, poor, and mostly African American community launched an enormously successful public protest. The highly charged publicity surrounding this event added a racial element to environmental discourse (Bullard 1990). The Warren County incident also led

the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to commission a study on environmental racism. The study concludes that race is the most significant variable associated with the location of waste facilities (United Church of Christ 1987). Although scholars have since disputed this conclusion (Anderton et. al. 1994), the study captured the attention of some minority leaders and fueled the rise of a national minority grassroots movement for environmental justice.

In 1994, the environmental justice movement won the attention of President Bill Clinton when he signed Executive Order 12,898, establishing a national office of Environmental Justice. In short, Clinton's Executive Order calls for federal agencies and federally sponsored programs to strive for equitable distribution of potentially toxic facilities. While the order in some ways institutionalized and legitimated environmental justice struggles, I often heard environmental justice activists complain that it "has no teeth" and does not provide any measures for enforcement (fieldnotes, October 8, 1999:17). Although the environmental justice movement has grown over the last 10 years, the activists with whom I worked still counted raising awareness about the issue among their top priorities. Thus, a decade or more after the start of the environmental justice movement, the impression that environmental concerns do not address day-to-day issues, like poverty and unemployment, still remains fixed for many minority groups (Bosso 1991; Brosius 1999).

Over the past decade, minority groups' alienation from environmentalism has gained the attention of sociologists and political and urban theorists. However, questions remain about how minority activists, themselves, explain their historic lack of interest in environmentalism, as well as how they are now constructing environmental narratives based upon their own experiences. In this paper, I build upon the work of anthropologists who have explored cultural understandings of environmental problems, and I examine how activists defined the environment in ways that resonated with their preexisting political identities and priorities (see Einarsson 1993; Kempton et al. 1995; Paolisso and Maloney 2000). In the cases presented here, I found that "the environment" became a multidimensional narrative that facilitated the building of multiethnic and multiracial alliances. Most research on social movements has found that ethnically based environmental groups generally organize in parallel but separate movements (Gottlieb 1993:265; see also Lichterman 1995). Recently, however, a few anthropologists have focused on exceptions to this rule and examined cross-class, cross-racial, and multiethnic environmental justice alliances. These studies have contributed to our understandings of why such alliances are politically useful and how activists strive (and sometimes fail) to talk across their differences (see Bailey and Faupel 1992; Lichterman 1995; Moberg 2001). To these studies of environmental justice alliances, I add a comparative analysis of how activists strategically created flexible and shifting environmental narratives to enable alliances and to further their political goals.

## Methodology

The first case presented here stems from full-time field research I conducted from September 1998 through October 1999 with the Hyde and Aragon Park Improvement Committee (HAPIC), a long-standing neighborhood civil rights organization in Augusta, Georgia, that entered into environmental organizing approximately nine years ago. I base the second case on part-time field research with the CAFE organization that took place between 1995 and 1996 while I was also attending graduate classes. In both cases, I relied on continuous participant observation as my primary field research methodology. In so doing, I attended organizational meetings including large gatherings that invited the entire community and small strategy sessions among group leaders. I also attended organizational events, such as rallies, city council hearings, and neighborhood trash clean-ups. In most cases, I recorded my observations by taking notes: although, a few meetings were tape recorded with permission of all present. Participant observation was based on the principle of reciprocity. I offered to assist each organization in any way that might be useful, from setting up chairs for meetings to writing pamphlets, brochures, and grants. Although CAFE members did not take me up on my offers to any significant extent, I did play a substantial role in HAPIC's daily organizing activities during my months of fieldwork. Reciprocal fieldwork proved beneficial in many ways. Not only was I able to exercise my own, personal commitments to environmental justice activism, but also by making those commitments explicit, I quickly built the necessary trust between ethnographer and informants that provides the foundation of fruitful fieldwork.

Data collection methods also included a total of 40 semidirected, open-ended interviews—12 in Williamsburg-Greenpoint and 28 in Hyde Park—with environmental justice activists at their homes, offices, or in the case of HAPIC, a community center. Each interview averaged 45 to 90 minutes in length. To capture the attitudes and understandings of a variety of activists, I interviewed HAPIC and CAFE leaders as well as regular participants who attended meetings but did not take leadership roles. With the permission of informants, I tape recorded all interviews and later transcribed them. In several cases, I have used activists' names at their own requests. In the case of HAPIC, after reviewing the material in this article, activists reaffirmed those requests with written statements. In the case of CAFE, the activists whose names I did not change are considered public figures and have been quoted many times in local media sources: masking their identities would serve little purpose. In addition, I did obtain permission from these activists to attend CAFE meetings and to use their names when quoting them. It should also be noted that New York University's Human Subjects Committee approved both research projects.

Some of the material presented also emerges from secondary research. This research consisted of collecting census

data, environmental health studies, and soil reports. In addition, I assisted Augusta State University (ASU)'s sociology department with the creation and execution of a quantitative survey of Hyde Park. ASU students went door-to-door and completed 176 questionnaires, between 62 percent and 70 percent of Hyde Park's adult population (Sociology Research Methods Students 1998-1999 et. al. 1998). The survey consisted of 41 questions designed to measure residents' attitudes and opinions about neighborhood concerns and behaviors as well as environmental issues and the HAPIC organization.

## **A Tale of Two Neighborhoods: Background on Community Issues and Activism**

### **Hyde Park**

HAPIC activists refer to their neighborhood as a "toxic donut." Only three roads service Hyde Park, which sits sectioned off from the rest of Augusta by a highway, two sets of railroad tracks and several industrial plants, a junkyard, and a power station. Open ditches line the streets of the neighborhood and run past overgrown lots and broken-down houses as well as freshly whitewashed cottages and one or two brand-new trailers. Almost every house in Hyde Park has a wide country-style porch and relatively large yard; yet, drug dealers crowd certain corners and the neighborhood is strewn with litter. Due to the palpable physical boundaries that set Hyde Park off from the rest of the city, the neighborhood appears to be its own enclave with distinct characteristics that combine both urban and rural poverty.

Hyde Park's development began in the 1940s. Because the land was swampy and had extremely low value, it was affordable for African American sharecroppers from nearby rural areas. Lots were relatively large, and families could continue to raise enough vegetables to sustain them while working in the surrounding factories or as domestics in the wealthier neighborhoods. As people settled in, they invited relatives from the country to join them, and many households in Hyde Park remain "kin" to one another. In 1998, the neighborhood's racial makeup (99 percent African American) was much the same as it had been throughout Hyde Park history. Hyde Park's population was also aging. Over half of its residents were over the age of 50 (Sociology Research Methods Students 1998-1999 et. al. 1998). As neighborhood elders died, their houses were often left vacant. Rising unemployment rates in the 1980s and 1990s left many residents in poverty, and many of their homes had fallen into disrepair. In 1998, approximately 61 percent of Hyde Park's 200 families owned their homes; yet, 77 percent of them earned less than \$20,000 per year (Sociology Research Methods Students 1998-1999 et. al. 1998). Moreover, allegations of toxic contamination made selling Hyde Park homes extremely difficult. Residents' lack of economic resources enabled drug trafficking to take root in the neighborhood and with it crime and violence.

Until 1970, Hyde Park did not have running water, paved streets, streetlights, or sewer lines. Residents pumped their own water and used outhouses. The lack of these amenities, however, paled in comparison to flooding that occurred with each heavy rain. Floods were so bad that residents often had to boat in and out of the neighborhood until the waters receded. In 1968, one resident formed a neighborhood association called the Hyde and Aragon Park Improvement Committee (HAPIC) to lobby for improved living conditions. Within two years, HAPIC made itself known to county commissioners and other local lawmakers and successfully lobbied for running water, paved streets, street lights, sewer lines and drainage ditches. Just after its formation, HAPIC also convinced the recreation department to rent them a community center. From the center, HAPIC operated senior programs, a daycare center, an employment program, and an after-school tutorial and health education program for teens. In the early 1990s, HAPIC added to this list of priorities their fight to be relocated from their neighborhood. HAPIC members were almost all African Americans and most either currently resided in Hyde Park or had grown up there. A few active members hailed from other Augusta neighborhoods but had close friends in Hyde Park. A core group of approximately 10 residents did most of the organizing for the association, and up to 50 or more residents (approximately one-fifth of neighborhood adults) might attend HAPIC's more or less monthly meetings.

### **Williamsburg-Greenpoint**

On the crowded sidewalks around the Marcy Avenue subway stop in the heart of Williamsburg-Greenpoint, Asian Americans, African Americans, Latinos, and Anglo Americans rush past each other. Also caught in this pedestrian melee are Hasidic men in long black coats, beards, and temple curls and Hasidic women wearing long skirts and wigs and often pushing baby carriages. The common sight of Hasidim distinguishes Williamsburg-Greenpoint from many other New York City neighborhoods and makes it one of the city's most diverse (Greider 1993). According to 1990 census data (the most pertinent dataset for the period of field study), Williamsburg-Greenpoint contained approximately 152,500 households. Of those, approximately 47 percent were non-Hispanic white, 45 percent were Hispanic, 6 percent were African American, and 2 percent were Asian, Pacific Islander non-Hispanic (US Census 1990). At the time of my research, 27 percent of Williamsburg and Greenpoint residents received income support, and 36 percent lived below official poverty standards (US Census 1990).

Like many urban neighborhoods, competition for municipal resources is fierce, and Williamsburg-Greenpoint has usually aligned itself according to ethnic affiliations. Because Latinos and Hasidim are the two predominant ethnic groups in the neighborhood, they have fought the most vocal battles over resources (Greider 1993:35; Hevesi 1994:47). For three decades antagonism marked the relationship between Latinos

and Hasidim and made ethnic differences in Williamsburg-Greenpoint synonymous with political divisions (see Checker 1996, 2001). Hispanic community activists argued that the Hasidim had easier access to the limited public funds that controlled infrastructures such as housing and schools. Hasidim, on the other hand, contended that affirmative action programs excluded them from low-income housing projects. Over a 12-year period, interethnic tensions led to approximately five violent altercations between Latinos and Hasidim. Adding fuel to the fire, the Hasidim formed their own security force in the 1980s, naming it the *Shomrim* (Hebrew for "guardians"). By the early 1990s, many journalists familiar with Williamsburg-Greenpoint predicted tensions would soon explode into a major urban riot (Greider 1993:35; Hevesi 1994:47).

In keeping with such ethnic divisiveness, environmental activism began separately in both the Latino and the Hasidic sections of Williamsburg-Greenpoint. In the 1980s, the El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice, a Latino community organization, formed the Toxic Avengers, a group of teenagers who tried to raise neighborhood awareness about local environmental hazards such as lead paint and pollution. In the early 1990s, the New York Public Interest Research Group (or NYPIRG, a professional nonprofit political action/advocacy organization that often focused on local environmental issues) joined the Toxic Avengers in opposing a city proposal to designate a radioactive waste storage site in the neighborhood. Around that same time, the United Jewish Organization (UJO) also began working with NYPIRG to lobby the city to find recycling alternatives to waste management.

By the 1990s, NYPIRG was working with both the UJO and El Puente in parallel environmental efforts. In January of that year, those efforts merged when El Puente's executive director, Luis Garden Acosta, met with UJO leader, Rabbi David Niederman, to plan a joint antinuclear rally. Although memories of who instigated this meeting varied, community residents agreed it was a historic event. As Garden Acosta often said, it "was like Nixon coming to China." Also in the early 1990s, NYPIRG launched an aggressive campaign against the installation of a 55-story incinerator in the Brooklyn Navy Yard, bordering Williamsburg-Greenpoint to the southwest. Both El Puente and UJO agreed to join NYPIRG in opposing the incinerator. In April 1992, Garden Acosta and Niederman held a community environmental summit that drew 1,200 concerned neighborhood residents. That meeting gave birth to the Community Alliance for the Environment (CAFE), a coalition of neighborhood groups, led by the triad of Acosta, Niederman, and Martin Brennan of NYPIRG.

As in the case of HAPIC, CAFE had no formal membership structure. Approximately 20-25 residents regularly attended all meetings and planned events, and another 20 attended meetings periodically. Large rallies and protests could attract between 1,000 and 1,500 residents (Greider 1993). By the time I came to CAFE in 1995, its core membership

included Latinos, Hasidim, and NYPIRG staff, as well as local artists, African, Polish, and Irish Americans. CAFE was a diverse setting for environmental justice organizing on several levels: its membership was multiracial, cross-class, and inclusive of grassroots and professional activists.

In both HAPIC and CAFE, most activists had prior experience working in community-based social justice organizations. Both cases, then, are typical of other environmental justice groups, whose leaders and participants most often have some kind of prior activist experience (see Bullard 1990, 1993, 1994; Gottlieb 1993). Having previous organizing experience contrasts with the experiences of many white middle-class environmentalists. For example, Szasz finds that the majority of veterans from the anti-toxic-waste movement became newly disillusioned with the government as a result of their environmental activism and concludes, "local hazardous waste causes were [activists'] first political experiences" (Szasz 1994:97). The contrast between Szasz's findings and my own highlights the need to look at environmental justice groups within the specific context of social justice and civil rights movements. Environmental justice movements, then, cannot be categorized merely as outgrowths of mainstream environmentalism. Rather, in appropriating the discourses of the mainstream environmental movement, environmental justice activists are protecting themselves from toxic urban environments *and* continuing to fight for social justice and equity in all aspects of their lives.

### **"Too Busy Trying to Live": Making the Environment a Priority**

In Hyde Park, the attitudes of activists and residents toward the mainstream environmental movement generally followed those of other minority communities. For example, although many people I interviewed in Hyde Park disagreed about exactly when or how HAPIC got into environmental organizing, all did agree on one thing: none were concerned about the environment before they heard their water was contaminated. One activist reasoned that the environment was "not really an issue because most people just were not exposed to it." Some residents said they had heard some things on television, especially regarding Love Canal, but most agreed they were "too busy trying to live" to care very much about them.

In 1988, the EPA ordered a major cleanup at Southern Wood Piedmont (SWP), a wood-preservant factory bordering Hyde Park. Routine soil tests revealed unsafe levels of arsenic, chromium, and lead in the soil surrounding the plant. Although some Hyde Park residents worked for SWP, the closing did not initially raise widespread alarms about contamination. Some residents attributed environmental awareness to a flood in 1990 that left corroded furniture and a foul smelling bluish-white mud in its wake. Still others claimed that HAPIC's founder, Mary Utley, had always complained about the high rates of cancer in the neighborhood and about the taste of drinking water. Some time around 1991, HAPIC

leaders discovered that the mostly white residents of Virginia Subdivision, another neighborhood bordering SWP, had filed a lawsuit charging the company with contaminating their properties and received a small settlement. Recognizing that ditches from SWP's property ran directly into Hyde Park, HAPIC leaders began alerting their neighbors to possible contamination and alleging corporate racism. Soon after, two local attorneys approached them and started to organize a class action lawsuit.

As more Hyde Park residents heard about the possibility of contamination, they began to link it to some of the health problems they shared. Some people had inexplicable rashes that broke out and then went away. Many children were born with asthma, and many local deaths resulted from respiratory and circulatory diseases as well as from rare forms of cancer. Between 1988 and 1999, various agencies, including the EPA, the Georgia Environmental Protection Division, the Agency for Toxic Diseases Registry (ATSDR), and the University of Georgia conducted approximately 10 studies on Hyde Park's soil, water, air, and health conditions. But findings are contradictory. For example, one study released in 1991 verified that the unusually high number of deaths in the neighborhood resulting from circulatory and respiratory diseases, as well as from cancer, could indeed be attributed to high levels of lead, chromium, PCPs and arsenic in local soil (Dever, Lofton, and Lavoie 1991:5). Yet, in 1994, a study conducted jointly by the EPA and the ATSDR concluded that Hyde Park's soil posed no significant health risks to residents unless ingested on a daily basis (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 1994).

Although inconclusive, test results and citizen protest led the ATSDR to post signs throughout the neighborhood warning children not to play in ditches. From 1990 on, most residents were convinced that their neighborhood was contaminated and that they suffered from health problems related to environmental toxins. Accordingly, they focused their activism on finding either private or public funds to relocate residents from the neighborhood.

Hyde Park residents thus began to categorize the environment as something dangerous and even deadly. For HAPIC activists, organizing to improve their environment became (as a poster in one major protest stated) a "matter of life and death." Further, residents interpreted the fact that a white neighborhood had received compensation from SWP while they did not as a clear case of racism. When I questioned activists and residents about why they received no compensation from SWP, or why, in all these years, they had received so little attention from governmental agencies, they all answered that the primary reason was because "the people here are black." Residents also agreed that corporate racism lay behind the fact that so many factories and plants surrounded their neighborhood in the first place. Charles Utley, HAPIC president and Mary Utley's son, explained:

[It's] a form of genocide. It's not by accident. And there's no one to tell people they shouldn't be there. Blacks are

used to doing what they're told and not asking why. As a result, damage is done to their health and the environment.... They're [thought of as] second class citizens anyhow (June 17, 1999, interview).

Further asserting their beliefs about institutional racism, HAPIC activists filed a civil rights claim against the EPA in 1994, after they discovered that an EPA contractor hired to conduct tests on Hyde Park soil also had major contracts with SWP's parent company.

For many residents, their introduction to environmental awareness was linked to toxicity and racism. For example, I asked one of HAPIC's leaders to define the environment. His response was to explain what most people in Hyde Park thought of it, "I don't think it's just chemicals, but a lot of people just think that. Racism is not just chemicals." Although he personally maintained a broader view of the environment, this activist's immediate association of the words "chemicals" and "racism" with "environment" revealed how it had come to be defined in the larger Hyde Park community. Framing the environment as a racial issue enabled HAPIC members to incorporate it into their organizing activities and focus on it as a primary concern.

Initially, Williamsburg-Greenpoint residents were similarly uninterested in environmental issues. Although general public awareness of the potential dangers of toxic waste had increased in the 1980s and 1990s, CAFE activists had difficulty convincing some community members that the environment was a cause for their concern. One African American activist explained that many other urban problems had generally taken priority over local environmental issues:

They were just so tired of being beaten up with all the problems they had, with violence, with guns, with drugs; they really did not care about an incinerator. They would not take notice of it. We had to bring it to their attention.

Upon first hearing of the proposed incinerator, many community activists in Williamsburg-Greenpoint actually embraced it, believing it would meet several economic needs in the community. Local politicians emphasized the incinerator's employment benefits, and even Garden Acosta initially welcomed the news, thinking of its potential for job creation. He recalled:

I remember when it was thought of that the Brooklyn Navy Yard would be the site of a giant incinerator, anywhere from 44 to 55 stories, I remember our city councilperson saying to us, some time back, "This will mean jobs for communities." And many of us said, "Great." Well, my father was an ex-hardhat in the Brooklyn Navy Yard, and I said, "Fantastic." We just didn't know. We didn't know what the PCB would do, the extra lead, to an already compromised air quality.

Like many minority activists, Williamsburg-Greenpoint community leaders had actually opposed environmental reforms in the 1990s and encouraged new industrial facilities in their neighborhoods.

At the same time the incinerator proposal became public, some community activists began to wonder about certain local facilities and their effects on neighborhood health. One African American activist remembered:

[We started] questioning because a lot of times you would drive around that area and you never quite knew what was going on in the Navy Yard. It's still an enigma. Even though the incinerator is not there, there's just so much activity going on in there. You go to bed at night, you wake up the next morning and there are smoke stacks.... We have high rates now of AIDS, drug addiction, children with respiratory problems. You know, we don't need that in this area. We have the [Brooklyn Queens Expressway], the Brooklyn Bridge, the Manhattan Bridge, you know it's just like coming on us and nobody is fighting for the people.

In connecting AIDS and drugs to the pollution in her neighborhood, this activist acknowledged the susceptibility of populations with depressed immune systems to environmental illnesses. More importantly, she directly linked social problems to environmental problems, a subject I will take up in the following section.

Williamsburg-Greenpoint activists soon correlated the city's plans to build an incinerator in their already polluted neighborhood with their status as a low-income, minority community. For example, when I asked why she thought her neighborhood was chosen for an incinerator, one Hasidic activist replied:

We're not the biggest taxpayers, I guess there are minorities living here, I guess that's what they're most likely to say.... Somewhere there has to be an incinerator. Maybe we just don't have the push or the pull in the city government itself.

This activist cited both economic and minority status as factors that contributed to her neighborhood's powerlessness over municipal decisions. Her statement illustrates how Williamsburg-Greenpoint activists came to see pollution as yet another aspect of urban life that was controlled by those with economic and ethnic privilege. Significantly, this activist did not refer to a specific kind of discrimination, such as anti-Semitism. Rather, she pointed to generalized class and ethnic discrimination. This more ambiguous definition of discrimination was necessary in a multiethnic community such as Williamsburg-Greenpoint.

Although the specifics of their situations differed, in both Hyde Park and Williamsburg-Greenpoint residents' experiences as minorities shaped how they viewed the environment. Once they recognized that the environment threatened them the same way crime, drugs, and lack of education did, the environment became an ecological *and* a social concern that was compatible with other social justice goals. As they continued to organize for the environment, community activists further expanded its meaning to include many of their traditional civil rights concerns. The following section describes how HAPIC and CAFE members created environmental

narratives that incorporated polluted air and water into the specific social justice issues they had historically prioritized.

## In Search of Environmental Justice

HAPIC approached environmental organizing in the same way it would have approached any civil rights protest. Activists contacted local churches, staged a demonstration, called a boycott, and filed a class action lawsuit. These actions led various governmental agencies to conduct approximately 10 studies on Hyde Park and surrounding areas between 1988 and 1999. They included three soil studies and five health studies, all of which tested for the same contaminants and environmentally related illnesses. All the soil studies found significant levels of toxins, including lead, arsenic, dioxin, PCBs, and chromium (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 1994). Three of the health studies found no links between the health of residents and contamination, while two found substantial links (Newell 1997:2). The Richmond County Health Department was evaluating findings from a fourth health study at the time of this writing. In this study, health officials were collecting full medical histories from residents as well as giving them complete physical exams to document their health problems and then determine which ones could be attributed to environmental toxins. Preliminary findings show that further study will be necessary to determine the connections between community health issues and local contaminants.

In 1999, nine years after its filing, the lawsuit had not yet gone to trial. It lingered on a legal "back burner," subject to the donated time of HAPIC's lawyers and delays from the SWP lawyers. In the interim, HAPIC activists continued to work on other neighborhood problems. During the time I spent with HAPIC, their activities included: an after-school environmental education and tutoring program; computer training for adults; the acquisition of a series of videos on drug education, conflict management, and teen pregnancy; a Stop the Violence Prayer Vigil and March; and applications for various environmentally related grants. Although contamination had become HAPIC's main focus, it did not preclude engagement in more traditional organizing activities, as the above activities clearly indicate.

HAPIC activists treated the environment as more than another agenda item; they also expanded its meaning to envelop all of their organizing activities. For example, in the winter of 1999, I attended a Sierra Club meeting with Arthur Smith, one of HAPIC's leaders. Although HAPIC rarely worked with the local Sierra Club, Smith and I went to the meeting to hear Augusta's recently elected mayor speak about his environmental agenda. During the question-and-answer period, Smith, the only African American in attendance, asked the mayor what he intended to do about violence in the inner cities. For Smith, it was perfectly appropriate to address inner city violence at a Sierra Club meeting because violence was an environmental concern for his neighborhood. In contrast, the Sierra Club members' questions were directed at

recycling, cleaning trash off of roadways, and creating bicycle lanes. When HAPIC activists say they are working to clean up their environment, they mean they are not just working to remediate the damage left by toxic contamination, but the damage left by a larger legacy of institutional racism.

CAFE activists extended their goals to include similar concerns. For example, a year or two after forming CAFE, activists began to plan a joint housing project for Latinos and Hasidim as well as cooperative education programs designed to foster greater cultural awareness in the neighborhood. In addition, Hasidic leaders met with other community leaders and city police and decided to rename the Shomrim (the Hasidic patrol force) as the Williamsburg Patrol. Thus, through their environmental activities, CAFE activists began working together on the very issues that had once divided them.

The HAPIC and CAFE cases demonstrate how environmental justice activists came to conceptualize a social environment that included a host of urban issues. Environmental justice literature has addressed the expansions in environmental justice discourse (see, for example, Harvey 1995; Novotny 1995). But HAPIC and CAFE activists have defined the environment and environmental justice activism according to their experiences both as minorities *and* as minorities living in particular urban settings. For HAPIC members, environmental justice meant working on problems of crime, violence, and drug education. In CAFE, it meant improving housing, schools, and police protection. Activists' environmental narratives were expansive, but they were also molded around specific social issues they had historically prioritized. The following section addresses how activists constructed environmental meanings in a second way—to facilitate new alliances.

### Sharing Dangerous Air

Despite working with some white activists, HAPIC's membership was almost entirely African American; therefore, it had less need than CAFE to find a discursive means to create a cohesive internal group identity. However, outside of Augusta's African American activist network, HAPIC found little support for its struggle. Activists thus needed to develop networks that reached beyond Augusta-Richmond County. First, they established connections with regional social justice groups, such as the Southern Organizing Committee (SOC), which focuses on issues of racism, economic injustice, and environmental destruction through leadership development and community building. Through SOC, HAPIC activists began traveling across the country to environmental justice training sessions and seminars where they met potential organizational allies. Eventually, they formed networks with a variety of professional environmental groups and, as a consequence, became involved in issues such as plutonium processing at a nearby nuclear weapons facility and clean air standards in Georgia. To accommodate their new organizational partners, HAPIC leaders began to expand

their environmental justice discourse to include all races, classes, and ethnic groups. Nevertheless, they did not waiver from their conviction that their specific problems resulted from racism.

For example, Charles Utley often publicly emphasized that the environment affected everyone and was "not about black or white, but all colors." I most often heard him issue these kinds of statements to media representatives and to mainstream environmental groups. However, at private HAPIC meetings and among African American community leaders, Charles Utley also insisted that Hyde Park's environmental problems had "95 percent to do with race." When I questioned him about his environmental message, he replied:

The environment is going to affect everyone. [Corporations and governmental agencies] try to just get blacks and they think this contamination won't affect them, that it will stop where the black neighborhood ends, but it gets everywhere.

Utley reasoned that by placing toxic sites in black neighborhoods, white officials wrongly assumed they would remain safe from environmental hazards.

It was no accident that Charles Utley often truncated his public speeches. He admitted to me that sometimes he did not always mention the part about racism because "you have to get a feel for your audience." In other words, certain audiences preferred to hear only the first part of his message—interracial harmony. Utley had learned to appeal to and take part in current political trends by using the environment as a symbol of multiculturalism. He had also developed a strategy for appealing to white audiences: if he convinced them that they, too, were equally threatened by toxins, they might find it in their own self-interest to help Hyde Park residents. Finally, by casting the environment as colorblind and deemphasizing racial concerns, HAPIC appeared attractive to professional environmental groups that wanted to diversify their memberships, but may not have wanted to work with separatist or threatening African American groups.

However, the popular appeal to diversity was a complicated matter. Balibar (1991) and others have pointed out that multicultural rhetoric often masks the continued existence of pervasive racial hierarchies. Harrison (1995:49) notes that, "at this postcolonial juncture racism often fits into a framework of discursive practices that denies the existence of race and hierarchies of races and cultures." In other words, racial differences are often denied and reconfigured as cultural differences that are ostensibly rather easily overcome through better communication between groups (Gregory 1994). This line of thinking hides the larger economic and social issues that continue to perpetuate racial disparities as well as the very existence of racism.

HAPIC leaders who traveled to many conferences and acted as organizational spokespeople also vocalized such multicultural rhetoric. Yet, among themselves, they tended to describe their situation in terms of "residential apartheid," "environmental apartheid," or "genocide." All the Hyde Park

residents I interviewed, many of whom were not active in HAPIC, cited racism as the clear-cut reason for their victimization. I often heard them say that if Hyde Park were a white neighborhood, residents would have received some assistance by now. The existence of racism, therefore, continues to be real and intractable to those who face it on a daily basis (see Sanjek 1996). Although Balibar's formulations about popular culture and mainstream politics are crucial to understanding how racism works in contemporary Western society, I would also argue that it is equally important to examine how racial differences are perceived and practiced by those who are disempowered by them. For HAPIC activists, racism continued to be an organizing principle of social relations despite their contextual use of multicultural discourse.

HAPIC leaders, then, developed a complex environmental narrative that at times stressed racial victimization and at other times emphasized the environment's potential to threaten all races alike. CAFE activists also used a malignant environment as a metaphor for unity. However, while HAPIC activists' primary goal was to find some way to save their community from its toxic situation, CAFE's initial goal was more specific. CAFE members wanted to prevent the incinerator from causing further damage to their health, and they needed to build local grassroots support and lobby local officials to achieve this goal. Constructing the constituency that CAFE required meant shifting previously narrow ethnic boundaries to create one all-inclusive organizational identity. Rather than using the environment to facilitate alliances with outsiders, environmental unity came to stand for common interethnic interests.

Local news reports often quoted Garden Acosta as saying that he instigated a meeting with Rabbi Niederman when he realized that "we all breathe the same air." He was also quoted as saying that: "We discovered we are the same people and we have the same needs, and the government is laughing at both of us" (Berger 1992:B3). Both statements underscore that CAFE activists were not only equally endangered by the environment but also equally affected by discrimination. The environment, then, represented a common situation and provided a basis for ethnic groups to put aside differences in the interests of accomplishing collective environmental goals.

To sustain a newfound unified identity, activists consistently invoked the idea that they collectively faced the same environmental dangers. At a planning meeting in 1996, Garden Acosta spoke to CAFE members and told them:

We trust each other now. We've sustained all kinds of problems. If we have that kind of faith and trust in each other, it's because this is cancer country now. Because studies coming up are showing we're cancer country.

According to Simmel (1995), social movements that employ highly abstract concepts have the capacity to unite individual interests and help overcome concrete differences. This unifying, abstract concept usually consists of a recurring threat to movement members. "[U]nification by a more chronic than

acute danger, an always latent but exposing conflict, will be most effective where the problem is lasting unification of somehow divergent elements" (ibid:106). By casting the environment as "cancer country," a shared, chronic, and discriminatory danger that would only worsen with the installation of an incinerator, CAFE activists maintained unity.

The built environment historically divided Williamsburg-Greenpoint activists into competitive groups with mutually exclusive interests. An intangible and noxious environment, however, provided activists with a common ground. During interviews and group meetings, CAFE members carefully avoided specific terms such as "racism" or "anti-Semitism" in favor of words like "minority" or "powerless." Activists, then, chose terms that represented them as one political interest group made up of "powerless" minorities. Importantly, CAFE activists far more often cast themselves as "minorities" than as "working class" or "low-income" people. Emphasizing their multiethnic rather than their class identities appealed to popular political trends that celebrate ethnic variety or multiculturalism.

Across the United States, communities of all sizes are becoming increasingly ethnically diverse (Sanjek 1998). Local politicians, many of whom are themselves minorities, recognize the need to acknowledge diversity and, on some level, encourage interethnic cooperation. Often these recognitions take the form of multicultural public festivals and events that highlight various ethnic traditions such as food, clothing, and dances (Horton 1995). At public hearings and protests, CAFE activists similarly accentuated their various ethnicities by wearing traditional clothing and printing signs in several languages. Through this kind of ethnic signaling, activists embodied the popular metaphor of New York City as a "gorgeous mosaic" <sup>3</sup> of ethnic groups and portrayed their cultural differences in neutral ways. These displays won activists press attention and support from local politicians. Eventually, CAFE members secured backing from enough city council members to require a reassessment of the incinerator's environmental effects. Stressing diversity proved to be politically trendy; at the same time, it also signaled that activists had begun to see beyond their differences and focus on the common discrimination they faced.

Barth (1969:19) argues that when two or more ethnic groups compete for resources, the articulation of ethnicity is a political act that occurs "along the border" between interest groups. It is not surprising, then, that when political interests shifted, so did certain aspects of ethnic or racial definitions. As activists' interests shifted to the environment, they redrew their ethnic boundaries and framed themselves as one disadvantaged group. According to Horton (1995:244), ethnic identities "[are] constructed on the basis of situationally defined political and class interests." I would add that identities are also reconstructed as those interests shift and change. In CAFE's case, ethnic identities were expanded to encompass all ethnic groups that had a common interest in improving and safeguarding the environment.

Their success as a diverse coalition prompted activists to try working together to improve other spheres of community life. For instance, Latino and Hasidic activists proposed a joint affordable housing development. In 1996, the Williamsburg Patrol (formerly the Shomrim) included Asian Americans, Latinos, and African Americans as well as Hasidim (Greider 1993:38). Finally, the United Jewish Organization and El Puente leaders began working with other community nonprofits to establish the Williamsburg Neighborhood Based Alliance, a project specifically designed to address community needs for health care and daycare (Greider 1993:38). Recent studies of the formation of interethnic coalitions have found that people cohere around "quality of life issues," such as schools, crime, and violence (Ferguson and Dickens 1999; Sanjek 1998). For Williamsburg-Greenpoint, however, these issues historically had been the cause of interethnic divisions. Only by folding these issues into a shared environmental narrative could CAFE activists blur ethnic divisions and work together.

## Conclusions

I have illustrated how two minority organizations adapted environmental discourse to meet their specific needs. The outcome for each group differed: CAFE won its incinerator battle, but HAPIC has yet to accomplish its goal of relocation. In both cases, appropriating environmental discourse had a significant effect on local activism. Both groups expanded their notions of an ecologically based environment, which they had not considered to be a minority issue, to construct narratives about a social environment that included their concerns. In its flexibility, "the environment" became a powerful narrative that enabled activists to develop new strategies, alliances, and approaches to the pursuit of equitable access to urban resources.

Developing greater awareness of the significance of cultural experience in informing and shaping understandings of the environment and environmental activism has several applications. As Paolisso and Maloney (2000:219) write, "A key role for an environmental anthropologist is to help make explicit the roles of beliefs, values, and experiences in the formation of cultural models that allow individuals to make sense of today's complex environmental problems." In its focus on environmental values, such an approach might facilitate communication between grassroots environmental activists and policy makers by making explicit the premises upon which each group's environmental ideas rest.

The research presented here illustrates how environmental organizing facilitated interethnic and interracial cooperation. Activists constructed flexible environmental narratives that provided contexts for new alliances. These partnerships increased local constituencies and linked activists with a growing number of grassroots and professional activists who are concerned about environmental equity and social justice. In these cases, organizing for the environment opened new possibilities for looking beyond rigidly defined political

identities based on race or ethnicity. As ethnic diversity overtakes cities and towns across the United States, cross-ethnic organizing becomes essential to building the power of poor and disenfranchised communities (Sanjek 1998). But, as Ferguson and Dickens (1999) point out, no standard frameworks exist for guiding the productive analysis of the alliance-building process.

This paper has presented two examples of alliance building and the role "the environment," an ambiguous narrative, played in it. Further long-term ethnographic research into diversity organizing might reveal other conditions under which multiethnic and racial coalitions are successfully formed to bring power to minority groups. By the same token, further study might also reveal contexts in which diversity organizing is not sustained (see Edwards 1999; Lichterman 1995; Moberg 2001). In either case, it remains crucial to take into consideration the past and present micropolitical contexts of the alliances under study. Connecting these contexts to cultural understandings of specific political issues will likely move social science toward a broader understanding of the processes by which minority communities become active participants in the institutional and political decisions that affect their lives.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>At its original formation in 1970, the organization included two adjacent neighborhoods: Hyde Park and Aragon Park. A highway later separated the two neighborhoods, and at the time of my study Aragon Park was only tangentially associated with HAPIC activities. I focused my research on Hyde Park, the larger and more organized of the two neighborhoods. However, activists continued to use their organization's original name, and I follow their usage.

<sup>2</sup>Referring to Williamsburg and Greenpoint as one neighborhood follows the usage of local activists.

<sup>3</sup>David Dinkins, New York City's former mayor, popularized this metaphor during his 1989–1993 term of office.

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